

Remarks at the Annual Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta, Georgia

June 6, 1991

Thank you all very, very much. Thank all of you. And Dr. Chapman, Morris, a fellow Texan, pride of Wichita Falls and the rest of the country. And Dr. Bennett, I salute you, sir. You came down today with one who's serving well our principles overseas, and that is a son of Atlanta, Paul Coverdell, Director of the Peace Corps, who's with us—one of Georgia's favorite sons. I salute him.

The last time—and we were talking about this on the long way up the stairs over here; this is a tremendous auditorium—the last time I attended a Southern Baptist Convention was in 1982. Too long ago. But never so long that I'd lose touch with the rock-solid values of this community, qualities that make it uniquely American. Strong but compassionate, proud but not boastful, decent and giving, and as Morris said, believing strongly in family, bearing an enduring belief in freedom, an abiding faith in the love of God and, yes, in the power of prayer.

Everywhere you turn, it seems, American values are ascendant around the world. Look at Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: there, places of worship long stood silent and subdued, forced underground by the iron fist of the state. But now, the churches, the synagogues, and the mosques buzz with life, reclaimed by the people, joyfully emerging to proclaim their faith anew.

In Africa and Asia and Latin America, your ministries flourish and spread the word of God around the world. And even in the heat of the Persian Gulf, nearly 200 Southern Baptist chaplains reported that well over 1,000 conversions among the service men and women of Operation Desert Storm had taken place, and some solemnified with poncho-lined holes in the sand serving as makeshift baptistries.

Southern Baptists have been doing quiet but crucial work, engaging in countless acts of kindness and compassion, spreading the word of God, demonstrating the profound power of religious freedom. And you've held to faith where others may have lost

it, gained in numbers where others haven't, and made a difference where others couldn't. You prove that the flower of faith can bloom anywhere; that no matter how hard the journey, no matter how humble a surroundings, God's love provides.

During the Gulf crisis, Barbara and I, and much of this nation—I think, in this instance, most of this nation—found guidance and comfort in prayer. And throughout the struggle, your prayers sustained us. And so, I want to thank you all and ask that you keep—as Morris generously said—those in the decisionmaking process, keep us in your prayers.

You know, I've confessed this to Dr. Chapman and a few others, leaders in the Southern Baptist movement. And for me, prayer has always been important, but quite personal. You know us Episcopalians. [Laughter] And like a lot of people, I've worried a little bit about shedding tears in public or the emotion of it. But as Barbara and I prayed at Camp David before the air war began, we were thinking about those young men and women overseas. And I had the tears start down the cheeks, and our minister smiled back. And I no longer worried how it looked to others. Here we go.

And I think that, like a lot of others who had positions or responsibility in sending someone else's kid to war, we realize that in prayer what mattered is how it might have seemed to God.

Above all, after all the months of praying and asking for God's guidance, I thought it important to thank God for sustaining our nation through this crisis. And that led to 3 National Days of Thanksgiving and Prayer, which I really believed strengthened our wonderful nation.

You know, for too long, too many have worried that we Americans have weakened the two fundamental pillars supporting our society, our families and our faith. But while the cynics may sense some kind of religious resurgence over the last 2 or 3 years, they've always been a lagging indicator of

American life. Most of us have never had to get our faith in God back, because we never lost it. In a recent survey, 40 percent of Americans named "faith in God" the most important part of their lives. Only 2 percent selected "a job that pays well."

In this bicentennial year of the Bill of Rights, we would do well to pause and reflect on religion's roots in our society, and our society's roots in religion. The Founding Fathers thought long and carefully about the role of religion and government in our society. And it's no accident that among all of the freedoms guaranteed by the first amendment—freedoms of speech, of the press, of assembly, of petition—the first was the freedom of religion. And that's why the story of a little girl named Monette Rethford, out in Norman, Oklahoma, is now getting national attention.

A fifth-grader in public elementary school, Monette liked to read her Bible under a shade tree during recess. No teachers involved, no disruption of the school activities. Just Monette and then, from time to time, a handful of friends who joined her voluntarily to share their faith and discuss how it touched their daily lives. Yet school officials told Monette that her prayer group was illegal on school property, an "unlawful assembly." They forgot that the first amendment was written to protect people against religious intrusions by the state, not to protect the state from voluntary religious activities by the people.

I would add this: that the day a child's quiet, voluntary group during recess becomes an "unlawful assembly," something's wrong.

In that spirit, once again I call on the United States Congress to pass a constitutional amendment permitting voluntary prayer back into our nation's schools. You see, let's put people first and allow them the freedom to follow their faith.

Putting people first also means making sure government allows people to make their own decisions. And that means giving parents and families the right to choose the kind of child care that they want for their kids. Choice in child care.

Just today we are publishing regulations that will provide the first vouchers for child care. And finally, low-income parents will

have the chance to choose where their kids get child care, including religious settings and with religious instruction. Just on my way over here this morning, here in Atlanta, I visited a church-based child-care center where children receive first-class care regardless of their parents' religion, background, or income. We fought a long time to preserve choice for parents. And today it truly becomes a reality, at least in child care.

We want to extend the concept of choice to include schools. Every family should have the freedom to choose a school for a child. Our efforts for choice in schools seek to put power in parents' hands. We trust them to make the right decisions for their kids. And some argue that choice will make bad schools worse. Our new Secretary of Education doesn't agree with that, and I don't agree with that. I am confident that choice will make even the bad schools better. They'll have to compete.

And something more—one of our national education goals: We believe that kids should be safe to walk the streets, any streets. Schools should also be free from the fear of crime and the despair of drugs. And if you detect a note of frustration in what I'm about to say, you're a good psychiatrist, because it's true.

Back on March 6th, I challenged the Congress of the United States to pass a tough crime bill in 100 days to keep our streets safe. And yet, the leadership has failed to make crime a priority issue. We submitted our first crime bill more than 2 years ago, and nothing has happened. Surely the United States Congress can pass a crime bill in what's left of that 100 days.

There's another issue before the Congress: that's the question of human life, the question of abortion, a difficult and a deeply emotional decision for all Americans. The question—and we've faced it before—is whether the American taxpayer should pay for abortions. And honest people of good will, I'm sure, differ on this question, but I firmly oppose Federal funding of abortions, except where the life of the mother is endangered. Since 1981 the Federal Government has determined that taxpayer funds should be used for abortion only in this

most narrow of circumstances.

And whatever we've learned over the last few decades, it's clear that America is a nation that no longer lacks a moral vocabulary. Ideals like decency and virtue are no longer subject to scorn.

And I'd ask that you hold fast to the Southern Baptist ideal of "a free church in a free state." Hold fast to protect—and, Morris, once again, in his generous introduction, spoke of this—to protect all faiths in freedom, and hold fast to protect our most essential unit of life, the family.

As I look at our social agenda, and as Barbara and I talk about it and worry about it in the wonderful setting of the White House, we keep saying: What can we do? Privileged as we are to serve this great country, what can we do to strengthen family life in America? It is essential to our well-being.

Let me close with a story—well, let me just make a couple of other remarks. [Laughter] Not many. I mentioned family, so let's ask ourselves in child care and education and crime legislation: Are we doing all we can to preserve faith and family? And, if not, we've got to do more. Only when we protect and preserve our most cherished ideals and institutions, does government by the people serve the people.

We are, as ever, "One nation under God." No nation better reconciles diversity of faith with unity of purpose. And as new challenges confront us we must draw on that strength and work to build a nation united in its commitment to decency and opportunity, to freedom, to family, and to faith.

Now to this story about a Kurdish family, Mikail and Safiya Dosky, who escaped from Iraq over a decade ago. During their perilous journey across the Iranian border, they became separated from their 2-year-old daughter, Gilawish. Mikail and his wife made it; the child, left behind. Their daughter did not make it out.

After settling in America, Mikail, the father, kept trying to get his daughter out

of Iraq, even traveling there himself, but to no avail. And just a few weeks ago, the dad, Mikail, got a phone call from an American helicopter pilot in Turkey, one of our heroes. This pilot had been flying supplies to save the lives of these Kurdish refugees when he got a note from Gilawish—now, this child, now 18 years old—asking him to call her parents in America. He did, and Mikail's friends at the First Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, helped him get to Turkey and bring his daughter back. And after thousands of miles, thousands of days, and thousands of dollars, Mikail and Gilawish arrived in America Tuesday night—where years of sorrow were washed away with tears of joy.

What a testament to the power of faith and hope and love, all of which God provides in abundance. In war and peace, as I've mentioned above, faith provides our solace, our shield, and our shelter. I understand what Lincoln talked about when he said many times he went to his knees as President of the United States. And as the Psalmist wrote, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." God's light leads us forward. And today, as always, let us pray for His continued guidance and His grace.

Thank all of you for your commitment, your leadership, your love, and your prayers. And may God continue to bless this land with freedom and peace.

Thank you all very, very much.

Note: The President spoke at 11:44 a.m. in the Georgia World Congress Center. In his remarks, he referred to Morris Chapman and Harold C. Bennett, president and executive president of the Southern Baptist Convention; Paul D. Coverdell, Director of the Peace Corps; and Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. Prior to attending the convention, the President toured the child development center at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta.